Humorous Consumer Complaints

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We differentiate humorous complaining from its non-humorous counterpart. Three studies reveal that consumers exposed to humorous complaints are more likely to: admire the complainer, enjoy the complaint, and share the complaint. Although humorous complaints had a similar negative effect on brand attitudes, they were more influential in brand choices.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“I should have flown with someone else or gone by car... ‘cause United breaks guitars.”

When United Airlines refused to compensate David Carroll for his damaged guitar, the musician parodied his negative experience with the company in a YouTube music video. His humorous complaint became a media sensation, leading United to apologize and offer Carroll compensation (Deighton and Kornfeld 2010).

Although complaints typically document dissatisfaction, some complaints intentionally include a positive element: humor. Drawing on marketing and humor research, we introduce the concept of humorous complaining and differentiate it from non-humorous (i.e., serious) complaining.

We define a humorous consumer complaint as a behavioral expression of dissatisfaction about a product or service that elicits humor in others. As compared to serious complaints, we hypothesize that:

Consumers enjoy humorous complaints. People pursue and enjoy humorous experiences (Martin 2007). People often dislike attending to others’ complaints (Kowalski 1996), but humor can help improve people’s attitudes towards experience they would otherwise find annoying and unpleasant, such as advertisements (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000; Eisend 2009).

Consumers judge humorous complainers more favorably. Complainers are often considered annoying or grumpy and may be ostracized by their audience (Kowalski 1996). Conversely, a sense of humor is generally seen as an admirable trait (Cann and Callhoun 2001; Martin 2007).

Consumers pay more attention to humorous complaints. Research in advertising shows that humor attracts attention (Madden and Weinberger 1982; Weinberger and Gulas 1992). Humorous content is remembered better than non-humorous content (Schmidt 1994).

Consumers are more likely to share humorous complaints. Content that elicits positive emotions is more likely to be shared with others (Berger and Milkman 2011). A recent study finds that the perceived humor in a YouTube video predicts its number of views (Warren and Berger 2011).

THREE STUDIES SUPPORT OUR HYPOTHESES:

In Study 1, based on random assignment, we asked undergraduates (N=75) to create and post a serious or humorous complaint as a status update on Facebook. In the 24 hours following the posting, participants recorded the number of people who ‘liked’ the update. Humorous complaints generated significantly more likes than serious complaints (M_humor=9.07, SD_humor=7.16, M_serious=5.59, SD_serious=4.68; F(1,71)=5.67, p<.05). Subsequently, we asked another group of undergraduate students (N=50) to read through the complaints. Half of the participants rated the perceived humor in the complaints and the other half rated how likely they would be to ‘friend’ a person who posted the update and also how likely they would be to share the update with others. Consistent with our hypotheses, participants were significantly more likely to ‘friend’ people who posted more humorous complaints (r=.30, p<.01) and significantly more likely to share more humorous complaints with others (r=.52, p<.001).

Study 2 explored enjoyment, likelihood of sharing, attitude towards the complainer and attitude towards the firm using complaint letters. The study used a 2(humorous vs. serious) x 2(bank vs. feminine product) within-subjects design. To obtain the stimuli, we asked a sample of mTurk workers (N=50) to send us the most humorous consumer complaint they could find on the internet. A research assistant blind to the hypotheses screened the complaints for validity and selected the two most humorous complaints. Another research assistant (also blind to the hypotheses) rewrote the complaints to be strictly serious in nature.

Depending on random assignment, undergraduates (N=165) read either a humorous or a serious letter complaining about one of two possible products, and assessed on seven-point scales their enjoyment of the letter, likelihood of sharing the letter, attitude towards the writer of the complaint and attitude towards the firm. Consistent with our hypotheses and the results of our previous study, we find that compared to the serious complaints, participants reported greater enjoyment of the humorous complaints (M_humor=4.60, M_serious=3.00, F(1,163)=27.25, p<.01), reporting being more likely to share the humorous complaints (M_humor=3.65, M_serious=2.87, F(1,163)=5.66, p<.05) and had a more positive attitude towards the complainer when the complaint was humorous (M_humor=5.52, M_serious=5.65, F(1,163)=8.69, p<.01). Interestingly, brand attitudes did not differ depending on whether the complaint was humorous or serious (M_humor=3.33, M_serious=3.17, F(1,163)=.38, p=.54).

Study 3 explored the influence of humorous complaints on brand choice, using online product reviews. If consumers attend more to humorous complaints, then humorous complaints may be more influential when making choices. We used a between-subjects design with 3 conditions (serious complaint and two humorous complaint replicates). To obtain the stimuli for this study, we first randomly selected a negative product review regarding a pair of earphones from Amazon.com. To create the humorous versions of the review, we asked 30 mTurk workers to rewrite the review in a humorous way, and then had a second sample of 39 mTurk workers rate how humorous they found each humorous rewrite. We selected two of the funniest reviews for the study.

mTurk workers (N=148) first read a product description for Brand X, followed by one positive and one negative Brand X review. Next, participants read the description for Brand Y, followed by one positive and one negative Brand Y review. Depending on random assignment, the negative Brand Y review was either serious or humorous in tone (two humor replicates). Participants were informed that they would have the opportunity to win one of the two pairs of headphones and were asked to indicate which brand they preferred.

As hypothesized, participants were less likely to select Brand Y when a negative consumer review of the product was humorous (21.8%) than when it was serious (42.6%; χ^2(1)=6.61, p<.01). Participants exposed to the first humorous review were just as likely (20.9%) to select Brand Y as those who were exposed to the second humorous review (22.4%; χ^2(1)=.03, p=.85).

In summary, the use of humor in consumer complaints can significantly alter the responses of other consumers exposed to them. Because humorous complaints are more enjoyable, attention getting, and more likely to be shared than serious complaints, we suggest that, as was the case with Dave Carroll’s complaint, they can be a source of empowerment to consumers who have been wronged by brands.
REFERENCES